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Experimental Female Fictions; Or, The Brief Wondrous Life of the *Nahḍa* Sensation Story

GHENWA HAYEK

Abstract

In this essay I argue that paying attention to the ephemeral genre of female sensation stories sheds insight on, and expands current understandings of, the many ways in which cultural production operated in the Arabic-speaking world during the *nahḍa*. Paying particular attention to two short stories in the genre, Adelaide Bustānī's 'Henry wa Amelia' (1870), and Labība Hāshim's 'Ḥasanāt al-Ḥubb' (1899), I show how these texts produced and encoded a series of cultural values about male and female bodies, and how they participated in the ongoing cultural debates of that era. In particular, they seem to be preoccupied with two modern subject formations: the modern, middle-class female subject and the modern, middle-class reader. While the sensation genre is known for producing and reproducing textual and cultural anxieties before resolving them in a socially and culturally conservative manner, I argue that, despite their inherent conservativeness, these texts were nevertheless able to imagine flawed, yet strong, nuanced and complex female subjectivities. This aspect separates them from contemporaneous forms of textual production, such as prescriptive biographies written by women or the novellas written by men of the same era, and renders them valuable cultural artifacts, despite their ephemerality.

Introduction

In 1899, a police superintendent from Kafr Abi-Najah, Egypt, named Ahmad al-Ṣarrāf, wrote in to *al-Dīyā'*'s editors and asked them to define the term *al-qīṣṣa* (story). al-Ṣarrāf was a regular correspondent in *al-Dīyā'*, writing in, as did many other readers from across the Arabic-speaking world, with inquiries about language, the uses of certain words and phrases, and queries about things that they had read in earlier issues of the journal as well as other publications.¹ The 'Questions and Answers' (*Aṣīla wa ajwibatuha*) feature appeared regularly in *al-Dīyā'*, and answering al-Ṣarrāf's question, the editor—presumably Ibrāhīm al-Yāzījī—offers a definition of '*al-qīṣṣa*.' After giving the dictionary definition of *qīṣṣa*, as well as its etymological origin, al-Yāzījī goes on to delve into more detail, explaining that a good *qīṣṣa* should have a central plot, preferably move chronologically from one event to the next (although he does concede that modern European writers like to upset this chronological order), conform to the same sure linguistic

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standards, *balāgha*, as other forms of writing, avoid being too complicated or having many characters in order not to bore or distract its readers, and, most importantly:

It must contain one incident that will arouse the reader's suspense, and cause him to want to know more; whether by exposing characters to a fearful event, or drawing them into a dangerous desire, leaving the reader to catch their breath in fear, and to hope that the ending will set things right.²

By highlighting the relationship between suspense and readership in the first line, Yāzījī is making explicit a mechanism (deliberately) used in the serialized press of the era in order to capture the attention of a wider reading public.³ But he is also making explicit—privileging, in fact—the relationship between anxious emotion, specifically fear, and prose narrative. In other words, Yāzījī suggests that a good story should act as a trigger for the sympathetic nervous system, which, as D. A. Miller has pointed out, is also a key feature of Victorian sensation fiction, a genre of particular ‘appeal to the nerves.’⁴ The fact that Yāzījī then connects the affective suspense of the caught breath to the release of the ending resonates with Miller’s classic claim that this particular genre uses both its characters’ and its readers’ emotions and nervous sensations in order to enforce a normative, and often socially conservative, disciplinary balance, to ‘set things right,’ as Yāzījī terms it. That this transition from emotional suspense to the relief of order is directly linked to what Yāzījī explains as the paradigmatic *qiṣṣa* is of particular interest.⁵

Given al-Yāzījī’s admitted literary predilection for stories that caused these nervous sensations, it is perhaps unsurprising that one of the first original short stories published in *al-Diyā*, Labība Hāshim’s (1899) ‘*Ḥasanāt al-Ḥubb*,’ would so perfectly conform to Yāzījī’s standards of an exemplary *qiṣṣa*.⁶ Mobilizing several of the sensation genre’s most salient features, ‘crime, deception, secrets and their almost inevitable concomitant, detection, with its overtones of spying and betrayal,’ the story recounts a suspenseful tale of disguise, deceit and dastardly behavior.⁷ A beautiful young nun named Soeur Augustine Marie seeks shelter in a rich dowager’s home, enchanting all those who meet her, including the gatekeeper of the estate, who is immediately plunged into abject desire. Defying all conventions of proper social conduct, he sneaks back into the house at night in order to take a look at her, and, peering into her keyhole, discovers that she is no nun at all; instead, she is a member of a dangerous criminal gang that aims to rob the house and murder its inhabitants. The mistress of the household plants a ruse of her own by pretending to be ill, and distracting the ‘nun’ by asking her to pray for her recovery; in the meantime, the police are sent for and apprehend the criminal nun and her accomplices.

The term ‘sensation fiction’ was coined in 1860s Britain to describe the explosive emergence of a new kind of fiction, one intimately connected to the burgeoning press, and to the latter’s role in framing the problems, and shaping the debates, of its day.⁸ In their work on the genre, Andrew Mangham, Kimberly Harrison and Richard Fantina have all demonstrated how it owes its existence not only to the relatively new facts of the cheap mass production of print media, the rise of the family-oriented magazine and its readers’ insatiable appetite for stories, but also to newspapers’ growing interest in, and reporting of, crime.⁹ In particular, sensation fiction tapped into specifically contemporary anxieties about crime, and the dangers it posed to the modern reader-subject; as Helen Debenham points out, ‘the special frisson of horror that thrilled the

reader, lay not so much in the existence and unraveling of the crime as in its proximity and its contemporaneity.¹⁰ Labība Hāshim, for example, begins her story by highlighting the fact that, despite its ‘strange events and humor,’ her tale also ‘warns of similar things that could happen in any time or place,’ alerting the reader from the beginning to the possibility that they too, could be the victims of nefarious plots; that their homes, too, could be threatened with crime.¹¹ Hāshim’s introduction makes her story’s lurid plot appear plausible, even ordinary; much as the newspaper did, it brings crime into the home.

Hāshim’s explicit correlation between the sensationalism of her story and the everyday lives of her readers is another common feature of the sensation genre, which often drew on precisely that connection in order to channel and express contemporary anxieties. In her seminal book on the topic, Winifred Hughes writes that: ‘the subject matter of the sensationalists is at once outrageous [a homicidal, kleptomaniac nun, in this case] and carefully documented, “wild yet domestic”, extraordinary in intensity and yet confined to the experience of ordinary people operating in familiar settings.’¹² Sensation writers, Deborah Wynne writes, ‘worked within the dominant discourses of realism, claiming to accurately represent modernity in their depictions of the unusual and aberrant which highlighted the dangers undermining contemporary [...] domestic life;’ such dangers included unscrupulous impostors, hidden secrets from the past, as well as sinister crimes.¹³ Adelaide Bustānī’s 1870 ‘Henry wa Amelia,’ published in Beirut-based *al-Jinān*, begins at an unnamed summer retreat, presumably in Europe, which the text deliberately conflates with the world of its bourgeois readers by mentioning ‘our country’s’ custom of retreating outside the city for the summer. Like *Ḥasanāt*, it is also a sensational tale of an unscrupulous impostor and her unsuspecting victims. *Henry wa Amelia* tells the tale of three women, Amelia, Marta and Hannah, and a ‘gentleman,’ the above-mentioned Henry, who meet at an inn while on a summer retreat. Marta and Hannah are immediately jealous of Henry’s attention towards Amelia. Consequently, by means of a cross-dressing trick and a betrayal, they manage to drive the two lovers apart. Remorseful and worried that she has ‘incited the anger of the Creator,’ Hannah later has a change of heart, gathers her three fellow guests together in her home and forces Marta’s secret out. At the end of the story, Marta is dead of anger and grief, and Henry and Amelia wed and ‘spen[d] their life together in relaxation and happiness.’

Scholars of sensation fiction argue that the genre was used to articulate the problems of modernity, particularly anxieties over the domestic sphere and over women’s bodies.¹⁴ Pykett writes that ‘the moment of the sensation novel was also one of intense public discussion about women and the law, about the state of modern marriage, and about women’s roles in the family.’¹⁵ As a result, these texts ‘registered the pulse of contemporary feeling and were deeply implicated in the immediate social and political issues of their day. Many of the sensation novels grew out of specific concerns about women’s social and familial roles.’¹⁶ Similarly, in the Middle Eastern context, the late 19th century was also a moment of great anxiety about social change, including the role of women in society, an anxiety that was often debated in the popular press. In their groundbreaking work on the period, Beth Baron, Marilyn Booth and Mervat Hatem have dissected the discourses around women, their bodies, and their gender roles within social structures such as marriage, motherhood and the family in the context of an often confusing, always prescriptive colonial modernity.¹⁷ Booth explains that this was ‘a period of extreme social ferment [... that saw ...] an intensified discussion of gender relations and roles mirrored and shaped further a sense of unease about the status of the family

as the basis of social organization'.¹⁸ Even more significantly, all three writers link this growing fomentation of anxious activity with the press. For example, Baron describes how the press was filled with stories of marriages that ended badly, horrible divorces, murders and suicides, as well as other related crimes, and Booth also mentions that this period 'saw an increase in the reporting (at least) of crime'.¹⁹ Given this situation, it is perhaps unsurprising that we see examples of literary experiments with the sensation form like *Ḥasanāt* and *Henry wa Amelia* in the Arab press; in fact, it almost seems surprising that there are so few examples of such stories.

It is precisely because of their rarity and their ephemerality that I believe we should pay attention to *Henry wa Amelia* and *Ḥasanāt*. They were written and published at a moment when the Arabic reading public was still in its formational stages, as the exchange between Ṣarrāf and Yāzījī as well as the dozens of letters published in *al-Diyā'* during that time show. During this period, in which the press was still in a state of development and flux,²⁰ these literary experiments raise several interesting questions: about genre and subject matter, certainly, but also about the roles of the press and of print literature in the ongoing social debates about the emergent modern Arab subject,²¹ and in particular, the female subject, during the *nahḍa*. After all, as Elizabeth Holt points out: 'the literature printed in [these] journals [...] enacted a debate over the comportment proper to its newly emerging bourgeois audience.'²² With their overwhelming concern over women's bodies and women's behaviors, these two stories shed new light on the ways in which female writers used fiction to explore—and ultimately circumscribe—women's social roles.

Significant scholarly attention has been devoted to the topic of women's contributions to the social culture of the *nahḍa*, and in particular, to the press; however, the study of women's literature from that period—let alone such brief literary experiments as these two stories—has received scant attention.²³ Yet reading these stories alongside the exemplary biographical narratives that Booth studies in *May Her Likes be Multiplied*, or alongside the contemporary representations of female characters in the serialized romances produced by Ḥāshim and Bustānī's male contemporaries, is an interesting exercise.²⁴ Unlike the exemplary, unequivocally morally upright characters in these latter texts, the women in the sensation stories are more flawed, more multidimensional, and, consequently, more troubling. For, as scholars of the sensation genre have pointed out, the form juxtaposes many versions of femininity, both 'proper' and 'improper,' forcing the reader to constantly have 'to rethink her conceptions of femininity and proper feminine behavior.'²⁵ Introducing the genre, Harrison and Fantina write that sensation texts tested 'the stability of middle-class mores. They also frequently challenged the stability of individual identity and showed a person's outward appearance and social standing to be poor indicators of personality and motive.'²⁶ Ḥāshim and Bustānī's use of some of the conventions of the sensation genre, including the focus on strong female characters, brings to light mounting anxieties over certain forms of female sexuality, and the threat that dangerous female bodies could pose to the domestic order. And, although I will show that the sensation genre is ultimately conservative, punishing its transgressive female characters, at least it allows for such female characters to exist. Moreover, the sensation genre also allows Ḥāshim and Bustānī to suggest that moral and domestic order need not be a purely male privilege; by allowing the action to be 'set right' by female characters, they deliberately place the woman at the center of moral authority and of the home. Furthermore, in addition to the ways that Ḥāshim and Bustānī use the sensation genre to flesh women out, they also use the conventions

of sensation fiction, in particular the distinction between appearance and reality, which is often literally encoded into symbols about disguise and clothing in these stories, to intervene in some of the pressing social issues of their time, especially those pertaining to women's lives, such as the evolving nature of marriage in *Henry wa Amelia*, and the discourse around veiling in *Hasanāt*.

The Big Reveal; Clothes (Un)make the (Wo)man

Significantly, one of the predominant features of sensation fiction is the prominence of female characters within it, and the existence of exemplary as well dangerous female characters. As Winifred Hughes remarks, 'whether heroine or villainess, it is always a woman who demands the spotlight,' which is as true of *Henry wa Amelia* as it is of *Hasanāt al-Hubb*; in fact, both stories pit women against each other, whether in sexual rivalry or in the struggle over a home.²⁷ Later scholars have connected this phenomenon with the genre's cultural negotiation of 'a wide range of profound cultural anxieties about gender stereotypes, sexuality, class, the family and marriage.'²⁸ Pykett adds that, in many examples of this fiction, 'an "improper" heroine may be juxtaposed with the epitome of proper femininity in such a way as to redefine both categories.'²⁹

More often than not, the fault-line of this juxtaposition occurred in the representation of dangerous, or even deviant, sexuality or sexual behavior, which, as Andrew Mangham points out, 'appeared to confirm presumptions that when women's sexuality becomes excessive, it becomes destructive. [Late nineteenth-century sensation] texts also seemed to agree with earlier suggestions that such horrors often lurked beneath calm, deceptive and beguiling feminine appearances.'³⁰ In both stories, a dangerous female sexuality is contained in the figures of characters that are on the margins of normative femininity. If the norm of respectable femininity during this time period lay in the (de-sexed) bodies of the married mother, widowed matriarch, or the virginal bride, then those women who deviate from this norm—the childless widow, the nun—become troubling and troublesome.³¹ Mangham exhorts readers of this fiction to 'see such depictions [...] as a notion working its way through a large and complex web of ideas.'³² Building on this, I argue that *Henry wa Amelia* attempts to work through the concept of the arranged versus the companionate marriage, while *Hasanāt* probes class anxieties before engaging with the debate about veiling.

Bringing to mind Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's remark that, 'in any erotic rivalry, the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved,' it is clear from the start that *Henry wa Amelia* is—despite its title's implicit privileging of the romance between its protagonists—equally, if not more, invested in developing the relationship and duality between its two main female characters.³³ The story gives far more time to fleshing out the relationship between its female characters with each other than their relationship with Henry—a fact that is made clear in the first few lines of the story, when Marta and Amelia are immediately painted as sexual rivals, by calling attention to their beauty. In the opening lines, Bustānī describes Marta as 'a middle-aged widow, not without beauty,' while Amelia as 'fair, with blue eyes, a face like the new moon and a neck like a clear crystal, tall with a thin waist.' While Amelia's physical beauty is clearly superlative (and, significantly, belongs to an aesthetic ideal that can only be described as western), Marta's attractiveness is nevertheless remarked upon, and noted, whereas the physical qualities of the third woman, Hannah, are just mentioned only in passing. Reinforcing the fact that 'the bond

between rivals in an erotic triangle [is] even stronger [...] than anything in the bond between either of the lovers and the beloved,' Henry, the third point in this *ménage à trois*, is merely described as a 'gentleman' on one occasion, and as 'kind' on another; he acts as a mere object of desire for the women.³⁴

Befitting the intense emotional register of the sensation genre, this initial comparison is quickly transformed into a dangerous sexual rivalry that heightens sensations to the point of emotional breakdown. Two weeks into their vacation, Henry begins to favor Amelia, finding in her 'the tenderness, loyalty, kindness and piety of Amelia's heart to surpass her two companions.' This favoritism is figured, during a time when the idea of companionate marriage was beginning to be thought of as the ideal kind of marriage,³⁵ by having Henry listening 'with all his attention to every word she [Amelia] said.' On the other hand, the story tells us, 'the aid that he would extend to the two ladies Marta and Hannah [...] was only a product of the duties of a man toward women.' This preferential treatment stokes the 'fire of envy and jealousy [...] in the hearts of the other two women,' who conspire to break the couple up.

Self-referentially deploying the tools of suspense, the story *Henry wa Amelia* also becomes a meditation on the means in which suspense works within the sensation genre. Initially, the text represents both Marta and Hannah as Amelia's rivals, but then it quickly becomes apparent that Marta is the more clever, more dangerous one, due to her cunning and plotting; in short, due to her ability to produce and manipulate suspense. Marta takes Hannah aside at a moment when Amelia is playing the piano (which marks her as a cultivated woman, but also as one willing to entertain guests; in short, an ideal bourgeois wife):

'This is the time for planning what we need to do in order to get what we want.' So the lady Marta said, 'Don't fear my dear, I've planned a ruse with which I will outwit the gentleman Henry.' The lady [Hannah] said, 'What might your ruse be?' She responded, 'Be patient until this evening, and you will see what the ruse is and you will see that I will succeed in all my plans.' And [Hannah] responded to her, 'My dear, I have no doubt in your cleverness or the perfection of your planning.'

Bustānī uses the strategy of suspense, drawing out Hannah and the reader's patience with Marta's exhortation. Marta manipulates her audience in the same way that the sensation story manipulates its readers. A few lines later, Marta repeats this trick with Henry, asking him to wait three hours in order for a secret to be revealed about Amelia.

Already wound up by Marta's suspenseful refusal to divulge her secret about Amelia, Henry, like the reader, is left in an excitable state; his emotions heightened to breaking point, he collapses into a state of nervous hysteria when he sees Amelia strolling hand-in-hand with a young gentleman. 'Burning with the fires of jealousy, he throws himself on the bed,' screaming, 'What a catastrophe. Could you—oh, my dear who revealed to me your love and loyalty and trust—do this to me, like this?' It is not insignificant that Henry's emotional state is configured in exactly the same terms as Marta and Amelia's earlier jealousy, and, like them, he too burns with its fires. The imagery of a burning fire of course highlights the intensity and danger of these emotions of jealousy and anger; but they also code Henry's emotional state as feminized, out of control. At this point in the story, Henry has been stripped of his masculinity as a result of these emotions. With his decision to flee instead of confronting Amelia, Henry's behavior

becomes marked as even more unacceptable. Writing about the sensation genre's inherent conservatism, as well as its role in producing disciplined readers by disciplining the bodies of its characters, Miller has persuasively shown how the genre works by nervously destabilizing women's and men's bodies, and how, at its heart, it is a fantasy about mastering not only these stories' dangerous women, but also the bodies of men, 'whom must monitor and master what is fantasized as the 'woman inside' them.'³⁶ However, at this stage in the story, the readers must, like Amelia, wait for an explanation for Henry's bizarre behavior.

If the first part of the sensation tale's unfolding is the creation of sensation and suspense, Miller tells us that:

foremost on the sensation novel's agenda in its second half is the dissolution of sensation in the achievement of decided meaning. What the narrative must most importantly get straight is, from this perspective, as much certain sexual and gender deviances as the obscure tangles of plot in which they thrive.³⁷

In *Henry wa Amelia*, the tangles are literally ironed out through two sartorial revelations—in short, clothing unmakes the (wo)man. Having reached the conclusion that she has not achieved anything from her role in the deceit, and now worried that such a deed 'might be the cause of [Amelia's] distress her entire life,' Hannah gathers her former companions together with a little deception of her own, not telling each one that she has also invited the other two. Once they have all arrived, Hannah contrasts the white flowers and white velvet gown Amelia has chosen, which mirror 'the purity of your heart,' with Marta's 'black gown studded with precious stones.' Marta's widow's black symbolizes a dangerous sexuality in one so soon to be a bride (we are told that Marta and Henry are to be married in three weeks), particularly when contrasted with Amelia's bridal white. It underlines the fact that Marta and Henry's betrothal has been arranged, and renders such a marriage unfamiliar through Martha's sartorial choice to remain in black. However, clothing soon becomes an even more troubling marker of dangerous, transgressive gendered identity. Immediately after making the contrast between black and white clothing, Hannah tells Marta, 'but once I saw you in clothes that suited you more,' and reveals that Marta had worn a man's outfit in order to trick Henry. With Hannah's revelation, Marta is doubly exposed: as a trickster, but also, as someone who is more suited to men's clothing—literally and figuratively, as a (good) woman in disguise. Combined, her widow's finery and her men's outfit doubly code her as transgressive, wicked, and unfeminine. Immediately after this, Marta is, for the first time in the story, left silenced, afraid, and 'due to the degree of her fear she remained silent and was unable to respond with a single word.' Later, we learn that 'Marta[s] cunning smote her in the chest, and she died angry and in grief.' This is the text's punishment for the transgressive woman.

As I have already indicated, Miller argues that, in sensation fiction, men's bodies are usually overcome by nervous, feminized sensation in the beginning of the story, but are disciplined and brought back to masculine order once the plot has played itself out, as Henry's is. Such things are deliberate, Miller suggests, since these fictions are invested in the production of 'a certain form of modern subjectivity' explicitly—one linked to the assertion of the dominance of the (right) nuclear family, brought together by mutual respect, admiration and love.³⁸ If *Henry wa Amelia* reaches its befuddled climax by troubling gender and sexual norms and rules of behavior, and producing a state of

nervousness in its characters and readers, its conclusion is far more normative, not only disciplining the transgressive female body, but also producing an assertive masculine one in Henry. As Miller argues with reference to the British sensation tale, in *Henry wa Amelia* 'a passive, paranoid, homosexual feminization [gives way to] an active, corroborative, heterosexual masculine protest.'³⁹ In contrast to Martha's silencing, once the secret is out, Henry becomes assertive for the first time in the story. Unlike his earlier feminized, infantile behavior, his helplessness and his impulsive flight, Henry now assumes a more familiarly masculine role. He apologizes and proposes to Amelia, and 'request[s] of her to prepare for a wedding in two weeks,' while ordering Marta to leave Hannah's house, and ends by adopting Hannah, telling her that 'he consider[s] her to be like a sister to him.' In short, Henry positions himself as the head of the household, and as the patriarch of this community; by taking one woman for his wife, another for his sister and banishing the last, he reasserts his dominance over them all.

The Even Bigger Reveal; Or Why the Habit Does not Make the Nun

If Marta's clothing choices articulated her unworthiness as a wife and partner for Henry, and highlighted the differences between marriages of companionate love and deviously arranged ones, the clothing in *Ḥasanāt al-Ḥubb* participates in a different kind of debate; specifically, one about veiling. As Baron, Booth and Margot Badran have noted, in the late 19th century, the idea of veiling was prominent in the literary and cultural discourse of women's writing, particularly in the women's press. In particular, Badran has described how women actively tried to, as Lila Abu-Lughod summarizes it, 'shift the debate from the veiling/unveiling issue to modesty vs. immodesty or seductiveness.'⁴⁰ By cunningly transferring the site of veiling from the body of a Muslim woman to the body of a Christian nun in *Ḥasanāt al-Ḥubb*, Hashim produces a perspectival shift;⁴¹ concomitantly, this enables her to use the sensation form to establish a double-sided critique of the argument for veiling women. She does so by, in the story's first half, presenting the veiled woman as nevertheless endangered by unwanted male sexual desire, then, in the story's second half, as Abu-Lughod and Badran suggest, shifting the debate to one of modesty and immodesty.

At first, *Ḥasanāt* seems to direct the reader's anxiety towards class, not gender; in fact, the reader is made to feel anxious for the nun, who is represented as the victim of unwanted, unsuppressed male desires; thus, the first half of the story seems to be a polemic against the dangers posed by the male servant's lust.⁴² When she arrives at the gate of the mansion, the beautiful nun is fully covered and her body is demarcated as off-limits by her religious garb. Nevertheless, she is immediately both sexualized and sensationalized as an object of desire. The gatekeeper emerges from his shelter at the edge of the estate to answer the doorbell and sees, 'a staggeringly beautiful girl, with a breathtaking face and black eyes that shot arrows through a person's heart, standing there.' Her beauty produces a physical, and almost religious, sensation in the man, who 'felt his heart beating powerfully in his chest, as if his soul were chanting.' While here too, the emotional state of the man is highlighted, note the class-inflected physicality of the gatekeeper's response, as compared with the emotionality of more refined gentleman Henry's. Soon, however, the gatekeeper also becomes enervated, falling prey to the nervousness that I have already described as a key feature of the male body in sensation fiction. Once the nun is inside the house with the widow, the gatekeeper is 'anxious and distracted, waiting for the nun to emerge with a heart that had lost its patience, and which

pined for another glance at her beautiful face. The minutes of his wait began to feel like days.' Once he realizes that she will be spending the night inside the home and will not pass through his gates that evening, he becomes 'unable to sleep, his thoughts occupied by the nun, who had not left his mind since he had first laid eyes on her.' The gatekeeper's physical desires are contrasted with the family's, who are drawn to the nun because of her charming conversation. Finally, despite the fact that the servant 'had been brought up in that house since his early youth' and had 'earned [...] the household's trust over their money, their wardrobes and all the contents of the house'—that is, despite the fact that he has been disciplined and raised to behave otherwise—the gatekeeper decides to enter the house, 'all the time, imagining the girl's beauty, particularly now that she was in her nightgown, instead of the dark heavy robes that hid her form from sight.' The gatekeeper's lurid fantasies of seeing the girl out of her modest clothing, and the fact that this sexual desire has driven him to defy all sorts of social norms, simultaneously suggests that no matter what, the female body cannot escape from the unwanted male gaze *and* encodes a fear and anxiety that the male servant can never be truly controlled, his body undisciplined and incapable of being disciplined. Therefore, this lower-class man is a threat to the home. Thus the story reaches its climax, with the dangerous gaze peering into the innocent girl's room through the keyhole.

If the first half of *Hasanāt* produces an anxiety in the reader over the potential violation of an innocent girl's body, the second half quickly supends our expectation of how the story should unfold by producing 'shock and tumult' in the reader as well as in the gatekeeper. Piling on the religious imagery in order to highlight the distinction between appearance and reality, between expectation and truth, Hāshim writes: 'that beautiful woman, pious nun, saintly sister and servant of the convent was standing in the middle of the room.' Uncovered, the nun's body has literally become weaponized, each phrase adding to the extent of her transformation from victim to criminal:

She'd cast off her nun's robes and wimple, and they lay off to one side, revealing a body covered in weapons held together by a leather belt. At her waist hung a metal ring with a number of keys of different shapes and sizes. Her kind glances had been replaced by an evil glare, and sin and evil radiated from her eyes. What made everything worse was the cigarette that she greedily sucked at, its smoke billowing out of her mouth and forming clouds around her that the breeze blew away.

In some ways, the shock at the nun's transformation is as much an education in reading the sensation form as it is a lesson in not judging outward appearances. Quickly, the story's focus upon the man's transgression is displaced by its description of a dangerous and sexualized body. In fact, although the gatekeeper continues to break social conventions by entering into his mistress's bedroom and then dragging her by the hand—which causes her to '[freeze] as stiff as a board and scream,' suggesting that she too is mistakenly fearful of the wrong body—his behavior has now been contained and turned towards saving the home—in fact, he only snaps out of his speechless shock because he realizes that not doing so could 'inadvertently cause the destruction of the palace.' He can now lead his mistress to understand that the nun's outward appearance is unrelated to her inner intentions, that her guest 'used the nun's robes as a disguise, so that she could sneak into [the] home and steal all the money and objects she could.' Once again playing out class tensions, the lady does not believe the gatekeeper until he takes

her to the nun's door and forces her to look; it is her gaze upon that still-uncovered body that confirms what he has reported.

By manipulating the reader's emotions and anxieties over the nun's body, whether clothed or unclothed, *Ḥasanāt* implicitly explores the contradictions of, and shatters assumptions about, class and sexual stereotypes; however, ultimately, the story's central preoccupation is with the home. As I have already shown, the home here is vulnerable, both to criminal elements such as the visiting nun, as well as to the vaguely threatening lower classes, as signified by the gatekeeper. This too, is a central feature of sensation fiction. As Winifred Hughes shows, the genre is preoccupied with the fact that:

The outward semblance of the domestic ideal may prove worse than empty; the angel of the hearth may turn out to be an incubus [...] the middle-class retreat can no longer be taken for granted. Social and moral chaos has spread even to the inner sanctum, infecting the emblem of domesticity. The one island of security and certitude remaining in a tumultuous age has been invaded and despoiled.⁴³

Ḥasanāt toys with these fears, and then, as in other sensation fiction, resolves them through a fantasy of collective, class-blind, collaboration to save the home. Once the home is threatened, its members, both servants and the family, collaborate to trick the 'nun,' who, back in her disguise, prays fervently by the dowager's bed while the latter feigns illness. In the meantime, the servants, who are 'in on the secret,' are ostensibly sent to the doctor's, but in reality go to the police station to 'inform them of the true story.' After that, the nun and her accomplices are apprehended and order is restored to the household. Thus the household, which we have been told contains about 20 members and an untold number of servants,⁴⁴ comes together. Just as in *Henry wa Amelia*, and just as in all sensation fiction, order—or, as Miller describes it, 'the dissolution of sensation' in favor of 'the normative requirements' of the bourgeois household—triumphs.⁴⁵

The Signs of Good Taste

Ultimately, scholars of the genre concede that sensation fiction, despite its lurid contents, its transgressive characters, and its nervous middles, is an extremely conservative genre. Throughout this essay, I have used D. A. Miller's influential work on the topic to show how sensation texts straighten out all their loose endings, in order to conclude on a 'happy picture.'⁴⁶ Their conclusions, Miller complains, 'mark the most banal moment in the text, when the sensation novel becomes least distinguishable from any other kind of Victorian fiction.'⁴⁷ Deborah Wynne concurs, relating this to the genre's need to make 'concessions to the cult of domesticity,' while 'raising readers' awareness of the fragility of the domestic ideal.'⁴⁸ As I have already pointed out, both *Henry wa Amelia* and *Ḥasanāt* adhere to Wynne's observation, by highlighting the forces of disruption that threaten the domestic happiness of their protagonists. By the end of each story these disruptive bodies would have been disciplined by silence, banishment or death, as in *Henry wa Amelia*, or by the forces of the state, as in *Ḥasanāt*. Happy endings are the mechanisms through which these stories underline and produce ideals of domesticity. In addition, both texts also contain hints about the material facts of domesticity; in other words, even as they construct their narrative arcs, the stories also make implicit

suggestions about the relationship between a good, tasteful home and sound judgment. By doing so, they make a place for yet another kind of woman in the heart of the narrative and the heart of the home: the tasteful matriarch.

The late 19th century was a time in which the ideal of domesticity, and the role of the woman within the home, was being produced not only through a dynamic and active dialogue between the press, the state and its male and female citizens, but also in order to meet the desires and demands of an increasingly globalized marketplace. In particular, Abou-Hodeib remarks, taste became a crucial category for producing a local middle class, and was used ‘to ground abstract concepts of modern order in everyday practice [and] to reconfigure the place of the woman at the heart of the nuclear family.’⁴⁹ Thus, it is noteworthy that the action in both stories is ultimately managed by women in their middle-class homes taking charge of, and putting right, what has hitherto been a very messy affair, and that in both stories these women’s exquisite taste configures their capabilities. Abou-Hodeib links the transition from women being seen as part of the home to women being seen as managers of the house to the transition towards modernity:

Whereas as ‘house,’ a woman formed part of a man’s household and was subject to his management, as manager of the house she became responsible for administering its life and the life of its inhabitants. The discursive transition from premodern to modern hinged on the central position of women in the home, as the domain of the nuclear family and as a citizen’s ‘first school.’⁵⁰

Significantly, the quote links women becoming domestic managers of the household with, of course, their being in the home, but also, with ‘schooling;’ this is interesting because in *Henry wa Amelia*, Marta’s return home coincides with her return to moral order. *Henry wa Amelia* mentions that Hannah, before rearranging the emotional affairs of the love triangle of Martha, Henry and Amelia, arranges her home and herself:

She began to prepare her house and arrange it, especially the reception hall, which she decorated with green vines and beautiful flowers such that if you entered it you would think that you were in the most beautiful little garden. After she prepared what she needed to, she put on her fancy clothes and her expensive jewelry and sat to await her guests.

Once her home has been arranged and decorated beautifully—that is, once Hannah has proved herself capable of tasteful domestic management—then we know that she will be able to resolve the situation that, when away from her home, she was in fact complicit in causing. Hannah’s return home restores her sense of moral right and wrong. In fact, it is only her return home that enables Hannah to separate Marta’s false desires and her deceit from the authentic love between Amelia and Henry, and to rectify the situation, which the text reveals by linking Hannah’s taste and competence as a domestic manager to her capabilities. Reinserted back into home and nation, Hannah can go about the task of setting the situation right, and of, in Miller’s domestic metaphor, undoing the tangles of the plot for both reader and characters.

In *Ḥasanāt*, taste encodes not only the dowager’s domestic skills and her management, but also what is most covetable about her home, which becomes fraught with danger. When the nun enters the home of the widow, she looks ‘about at the objects

in the room and its decoration, wondering at the beauty, neatness, and excellent taste that each item revealed.' Of course, it is precisely these objects that the nun wants to steal; these objects, the signifiers of the dowager's taste and wealth, become the objects of unwanted desires. It is worth noting that the category of taste was a controversial one during this period, and the intellectual classes were actively involved in debates over the meaning of taste, and in particular what counted as 'good' taste and what did not.⁵¹ Significantly, it is when she learns that these objects are at risk that the dowager shakes off her nervous fit, and snaps into the capable management of the household affairs that lead to the nun's arrest.

If the link between good taste, sound domestic management and the moral safety of the nation is implicit in *Henry wa Amelia*, it is clearly reinforced in *Ḥasanāt*. Booth has written that:

Domesticity delineated a space of both regulation and self-affirmation for women, [but] it also represented a source and microcosm of nationalist effort. The instrumentality of the idea of home, with 'woman' written at the center, to the concept of nation has engaged much recent scholarship across many histories.⁵²

As I have already indicated, the dowager's capability and good household management allow her to counter-trick the deceitful nun and safeguard her home from its most intimate recess, her own bedroom. The desire at the heart of the sensation story here is not only one of discipline and order replacing chaos and dissimulation, but it is also a desire for the nation in more than ways than one. Obviously, the story ends with state power, represented in the police force, working with the citizenry across the social spectrum in order to 'set things right.' But through its domestic fantasy about the ideal home, one in which servants feel as much pride and ownership as their masters, and where formerly important, and perhaps even threatening, class distinctions are erased in the defense of the home from outsiders, *Ḥasanāt* casts the home as a 'social space of citizenship' by reconfiguring one threat, that of the servants, as unfounded, and the other, the more dangerous because less apparent, as containable.⁵³

Through good taste, capability and sound crisis management, Hannah and the widow carve out a space for themselves at the heart of the home and at the heart of their respective stories; however, as I indicated at the top of this section, they also carve out a space for a kind of woman that is different from the two 'proper' and 'improper' feminine extremes of the sensation genre. These women are not perfect, nor are they exemplary in any way; Hannah, after all, is initially complicit with Marta's scheme, and the dowager widow breaks down before gathering herself. Moreover, neither hesitates to use any means necessary, even deceitful ones, for her own ends. All of these feminine figures, despite the brevity of both stories, and despite the plot-based rather than the character-based nature of the sensation genre, present their reader with a spectrum of femininity that, while not nuanced, is certainly richer than in other contemporary writing, fictional or non-fictional. It is here, as Pykett suggests, that the value of the sensation form lies, for sensation fiction is neither 'the transgressive or subversive field of the improper feminine, [n]or the contained, conservative domain of the proper feminine.'⁵⁴ Instead, Pykett writes:

we should explore the sensation novel as a site in which the contradictions, anxieties and opposing ideologies of [nineteenth century] culture converge and are put into play, and as a medium which registered and negotiated (or failed to negotiate) a wide range of profound cultural anxieties.⁵⁵

Produced in a time of fervent cultural activity and flux, these Arabic sensation stories give us insight into how anxieties over women, marriage, and the home were figured in the contemporary press by women themselves; they add a distinct voice to the (growing) body of scholarship on women's roles and lives during the *nahḍa*.

Conclusion

The formulation of good taste is a theme that is salient to our discussion in more ways than one: it ties the production of 'good taste' in the stories with the 'good taste' that Yāzījī and his contemporaneous editors were trying to produce in their new readers, especially with respect to new literary forms such as the *qisṣa*, which is a reminder that all sorts of cultural and social definitions were in flux during this period. The issue of taste also serves to connect us to one of the enduring critiques of British sensation fiction during its time period: that the entire genre, in effect, was thought to be in extremely poor taste, and scandalized its Victorian readership.⁵⁶ While there is no evidence that Arab audiences felt scandalized about *Henry wa Amelia* or *Ḥasanāt al-Ḥubb*, since neither *al-Jinān* nor *al-Diyā'* published readers' letters about either story, perhaps their very ephemerality is an indication that the form may have proved too scandalous, its anxieties and implications too troubling, for contemporary readers (of course, the obverse may also be possible, and the genre may have been too uninteresting or not at all compelling for its readers). However, unless evidence is unearthed to the contrary, such conjectures, and many other questions pertaining to this short-lived genre, must unfortunately remain strictly within the realm of speculation. What we can be certain of is that these experimental literary forms were, briefly, a part of the cultural conversation between press and reading public of their time.

In spite of—or perhaps I should say because of—their ephemerality, these stories are valuable because they serve as a reminder of the myriad genres and discourses that populated the pages of journals and newspapers during the *nahḍa*, and remind us all that cultural processes at any moment are dynamic and mutable. For every literary or cultural form that survives and endures, many others are forgotten. As recent scholarship continues to interrogate and revisit the *nahḍa*, it must keep in mind Raymond Williams' exhortation that 'in authentic historical analysis it is necessary at every point to recognize the complex interrelations between movements and tendencies both within and beyond a specific and effective dominance.'⁵⁷ In short, Williams remarks that, in order to engage effectively any cultural moment, we have to understand not only the dominant culture—that is, what endures and coheres to become the sociocultural norm, aesthetic or otherwise—but also the residual and emergent cultural processes that have been appropriated, or discarded, by the processes of dominant culture formation. For Williams, the residual is connected to the past and the emergent is very much connected to the new—'by emergent,' he writes, 'I mean, first, that new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationship are continually being created' (123).⁵⁸ He then adds that 'a new class is always a source of emergent cultural practice,' words with particular resonance for the rising literate bourgeois reading public of the *nahḍa*.⁵⁹

Crucially, Williams connects emergent practice to ‘finding new forms or adaptations of form.’⁶⁰ As I have here shown, the sensation genre was one such emergent form to rise out of (and apparently drown in) the press culture of the ebullient and dynamic cultural environment of the 19th century Arab *nahḍa*. Significantly, Williams acknowledges that not all emergent forms are absorbed into the dominant culture, and that some disappear altogether, just as the sensation genre seems to have disappeared from the Arabic literary consciousness, and particularly from the processes of canon formation that have often excluded women’s writings and dismissed most serialized fiction as well. Nevertheless, following Williams, I believe that it is essential to a non-reductive understanding of any cultural moment to seriously engage with emergent forms, even those that have not endured. Positioning these ephemeral literary experiments in Arab women’s writing within the realm of emergent cultural processes allows us to contextualize them within their own dynamic, rapidly-evolving cultural contexts, and allows us to see them as part of the cultural dialogue of a particularly vibrant, exciting moment in the Arab cultural context.

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Notes

1. For much of 1899, *al-Diyā*’s readers were concerned with the publications of the Jesuit Lūs Shaykhū, especially with their linguistic errors; so much so that the journal’s editors finally had to publish a plea to their readers to stop sending them such letters. But readers also wrote in with questions about medical matters, such as whether one could contract plague (*al-tā’ūn*) twice.
2. *al-Diyā*, Issue 8, 31 December 1899 (my translation).
3. For more on this, see Elizabeth Holt’s ‘Narrative and the Reading Public,’ Holt makes an argument that suspense is produced and enacted by these early serialized prose novels and novellas, as a way of forming a new reading public.
4. Daly, ‘Railway Novels,’ 466 (paraphrasing Miller).
5. Also interesting, although perhaps tangential, is that the originator of the question was a policeman; Miller’s hypothesis about Victorian literature and discipline is contained in *The Novel and the Police*.
6. *al-Diyā* published several translated stories, *riwāyāt mu’arraba*, usually by Nasīb Affandī al-Mish‘alānī.
7. Debenham, ‘The Victorian Sensation Novel,’
8. Gesturing to its rapid takeover of the British literary landscape, Nicholas Daly describes the genre as ‘appearing as if from nowhere’ to dominate the literary scene during the 1860s. Daly, ‘Railway Novels,’ 466.
9. For a summary of this scholarship, see the introduction to Harrison and Fantina’s *Victorian Sensations*.
10. Debenham, ‘The Victorian Sensation Novel,’ 211.
11. Hāshim, ‘Ḥasanāt al-Ḥubb,’ In what follows, I will use my own translation of Hāshim’s *Ḥasanāt* and Elizabeth Holt’s translation of *Henry wa Amelia*, with her kind permission. Both translations will appear in the forthcoming (2013) anthology *The Arab Renaissance*:

- Literature, Culture and Media*. I have deliberately chosen not to paginate quotes from the translations, since these have obviously not been set yet.
12. Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar*, 16.
 13. Wynne, *The Sensation Novel*, 7.
 14. *Ibid.*, 2.
 15. Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine*, 20.
 16. *Ibid.*, 198–199.
 17. Hatem, *Literature, Gender and Nation Building*, 119, suggests that the social features of colonial modernization produced a 'new lifestyle [that] undermined the Islamic definition of the roles that men and women were to play within the marriage institution and familial rights.'
 18. Booth, *May Her Likes*, 38.
 19. Baron, *Women's Awakening*, 166–168; and Booth, *May Her Likes*, 38.
 20. For an overview of the topic, see Ayalon, *The Press in the Modern Arab Middle East*.
 21. For more on the relationship between the press and the emergent readership, see Holt, 'Narrative and the Reading Public'; and Sheehi, *Foundations of Modern Arab Identity*.
 22. Holt, 'Narrative and the Reading Public,' 39.
 23. Beth Baron acknowledges this point in *The Women's Awakening in Egypt*; in the context of Lebanon, things have been even more dire. For more on the latter, see Holt, 'Narrative and the Reading Public.'
 24. For an example, see Stephen Sheehi's reading of the female character Warda in Salīm Bustānī's longer serial narrative *al-Hiyām fī Jinān al-Shām*, published in *al-jinān* in the same year as *Henry wa Amelia*. Warda, Sheehi remarks, is an incredibly passive figure, which is necessary in order for her 'to be the hero's desired love object,' Sheehi, *Foundations of Modern Arab Identity*, 87.
 25. Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine*, 19.
 26. Harrison and Fantina, *Victorian Sensations*, xii.
 27. Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar*, 45.
 28. Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine*, 51.
 29. *Ibid.*, 19.
 30. Mangham, *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction*, 210.
 31. For more on the two ideals of marriage and mothering in the female press in Egypt, see the chapter entitled 'Catherine the Great's embroidery' in Booth, *May Her Likes Be Multiplied*.
 32. Mangham, *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction*, 210.
 33. Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Eve*, 20.
 34. *Ibid.*
 35. On the discussion about companionate marriage, Baron, *The Women's Awakening in Egypt*, 165, writes: 'Writers argued that marriage should be based on love, not economic considerations, and a couple should be able to meet before marriage to determine affinity.'
 36. Miller, *The Novel and the Police*, 156.
 37. *Ibid.*, 165.
 38. Daly, 'Railway Novels,' 466.
 39. Miller, *The Novel and the Police*, 164.
 40. Abu-Lughod, *Remaking Women*, 10.
 41. And also, perhaps, makes a little joke: Hāshim was educated at a convent run by the same order of nuns to which Soeur Augustine Marie claims to belong.
 42. Mervat Hatem and Marilyn Booth both note a class anxiety about lower-class men and women that pervades the writing of 19th-century women. See Hatem, *Literature, Gender and Nation Building*; and Booth, *May Her Likes be Multiplied*.
 43. Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar*, 45.
 44. In *May her Likes Be Multiplied*, Booth points out how mention of servants or domestic staff was often occluded from women's biographies, in order to highlight their own domestic capacities.
 45. Miller, *The Novel and the Police*, 165.
 46. *Ibid.*

47. Ibid.
48. Wynne, *The Sensation Novel*, 10.
49. Abou-Hodeib, 'Taste and Class,' 476.
50. Ibid., 479.
51. For an overview of this, see Abou-Hodeib, 'Taste and Class,'
52. Booth, *May Her Likes be Multiplied*, 225.
53. Abou-Hodeib, 'Taste and Class,' 479.
54. Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine*, 52.
55. Ibid.
56. For a good summary of this scandal, see the introduction to Harrison and Fantina, *Victorian Sensations*.
57. Williams, *Marxism and Culture*, 121.
58. Ibid., 123.
59. Ibid., 124.
60. Ibid., 126.

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